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Ecuador confronts harsh reality of its 1st guerrilla group

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A little-known Ecuadoran guerrilla movement recently made news by kidnapping and then murdering a prominent banker. Increasingly worried U.S. officials believe the group, Alfaro Vive, Carajo! (AVC), is on schedule in its meticulously planned attempt to destroy the democratic, pro-American government of President Leon Febres Cordero.

Unlike neighboring Peru and Colombia, where guerrilla movements have proliferated, Ecuador until recently has had virtually no experience in guerrilla warfare.

Although the AVC reportedly has existed for five years and thus is still in the early stages of its effort, the guerrilla group began mounting field operations only in the last two years.

It first gained notice by stealing from a Guayaquil museum the sword of the group's namesake, Eloy Alfaro, a late 19th century anti-clerical and Liberal Party President — a stunt similar to the theft of Simon Bolivar's sword a few years earlier by the Colombian guerrilla group M-19. The AVC, like the M-19, subsequently turned to bank robberies to finance operations and the takeover of television studios to give the group much-needed publicity.

Despite these efforts, Alfaro Vive attracted no attention in the United States and little notice in Ecuador until the kidnapping and murder last week of the country's leading banker, Nahin Isaías.

Even before the kidnapping, however, there were signs that the AVC was abandoning the Robin Hood stage of its revolt, a first phase designed to gain favorable publicity with as few human casualties as possible.

The AVC no longer seems content to stage propaganda exercises like spray-painting slogans at midday on the walls of the pro-government Liberal Party training center — an act

of political vandalism carried out in full view of security guards protecting the headquarters of the U.S. AID mission.

Instead, the AVC has become increasingly violent. Last spring, it raided a police armory and captured a large cache of weapons and ammunition. Later, a guerrilla bomb factory in Quito blew up, killing several terrorists in a residential neighborhood. Recently, in a Guayaquil shootout, the guerrilla group killed several policemen.

For months, U.S. intelligence has been certain that the AVC would soon begin the second phase of its struggle, abandoning threats to abduct the wealthy and carrying out the kidnappings instead.

The United States also expects the second phase to include attacks on Americans, a move that will guarantee worldwide attention for Alfaro Vive.

"We're concerned and we're on the alert for whatever may come down the pike," one State Department official told The Washington Times.

In the past, attacks on Americans and U.S. facilities in Ecuador have been low-level affairs. The AVC is believed responsible for a May 1984

incident in which a small bomb was thrown over the U.S. Embassy wall in Quito, exploding near a Marine guard post after office hours. No injuries were reported. Another small bomb was thrown at a U.S. binational center in Guayaquil last June — again after hours, with no damage done.

If the AVC does step up the violence, the Marxist group seems prepared to do so in a big way. It is being directly assisted by the more experienced Colombian guerrilla movement, M-19.

Members of the AVC are "kid brothers" of the M-19, according to one State Department official; M-19 members were reported to have formed part of the group that carried out the Isaías kidnapping, and were among the four rebels killed by

a commando squad that attempted to rescue the banker after a month of captivity.

The Guayaquil newspaper El Universo reported last week that the kidnapping team was led by Alfonso Benavides, a Colombian and an M-19 member. Some American officials also have accused the M-19 of participating in and leading the operation.

While the AVC's Marxist credentials are unquestioned, its exact ideological stance has been somewhat erratic. In the AVC's early years, Albania was supposed to have been its principal backer and thus held in suspicion by the Soviet Union and its appendage in Ecuador, the Ecuadoran Communist Party.

In recent years, the AVC's ideological coloration seems to have changed. Its members are reported to have gotten on-the-job training in Nicaragua and El Salvador by fighting with the Sandinistas against anti-Sandinista forces and with Salvadoran guerrillas seeking to overthrow the government of President Jose Napoleon Duarte.

Last September, one of the AVC's top leaders, Rosa Cardenes, was captured by the Ecuadoran police. Miss Cardenes was carrying documents that showed she had been soliciting funds from Nicaragua and Libya — familiar countries to those on the terrorist circuit. Tripoli and Managua's response to the AVC was tentative: Ready cash seemed dependent on the AVC proving itself a serious organization. Whether the August kidnapping will help foreign fund raising is unclear, but the need to do more of a "revolutionary" nature will clearly drive the AVC to a more violent path.

Ecuador's police force is undermanned, underpaid and undertrained, and, with the exception of Rosa Cardenes' capture, has had little success combatting the AVC. The police have almost no intelligence capability and they reportedly have been unable to penetrate the AVC, which has developed a reputation for discipline, secrecy and meticulous planning.

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U.S. officials in Quito have worked hard to change attitudes within the military before matters get completely out of hand. Section 660 of the Foreign Assistance Act, which forbids American aid to foreign police forces, was amended recently to allow assistance to combat terrorism — something that seems relevant to Ecuador's problem.

At the same time, the State Department is pushing for increased military assistance to that Andean country. Concessional aid amounted to \$2 million in fiscal 1985, a sum that will double next year. Officials are now discussing an even larger amount for 1987, although precise figures will not become public until January. Although the military aid package — which includes \$1 million for military training in 1985 and 1986 — is modest by Central American standards, officials expect strong resistance from the U.S. Congress.